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MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: SOCIALIZATION FOR WHAT?*

Bertram Shlensky and Edgar H. Schein

Sloan School of Management

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Overview of the Study

The management education research project has attempted to examine the processes and outcomes of management education. First, we have explored the content and methodology of management education at MIT in order to determine precisely its dynamics and effects. Secondly, we have focused on changes in attitudes and values during the educational experience in order to determine how the student is socialized toward the managerial role. Finally, we have examined the managerial career after graduation to explore problems of the utilization of management education.

We have relied on a variety of research instruments, techniques, and populations. First, whenever possible, we have gathered longitudinal data on students, starting with their educational experience and following them into their early career years.

We make the assumption that the educational institution is only one of a series of organizations which influences the individual during his emerging career. Longitudinal studies enable us to measure the changes and effects which occur during and after the educational experience, and to infer the origin of such changes. Measuring change also enables us to evaluate the congruence between the norms and values during management education, and subsequently after graduation.

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Second, our emphasis is on the study of values and attitudes rather than the study of cognitive development. It is our assumption that many of the important changes which occur in school concern attitudes and values toward oneself, one's career, and how one uses one's knowledge and skills. While it is a simple task to define the technical skills one learns, it is quite difficult to determine how those skills are utilized and what role they play in the managerial career.

Our study also attempts to cover the entire managerial career, using our various student populations--undergraduates, graduate students, middle managers, and senior managers--as equally relevant target groups for research. In studying attitude and value change it is then possible to use the faculty positions on certain issues as one of the reference points and the senior managers as another. It also enables us to determine whether there are certain key attitudes which characterize the various stages of the management career.

The specific instruments in our study vary depending on our objectives. We have used open ended interviews and questionnaires in order to isolate significant variables and develop a complete picture of the individual. We have used various scaled instruments in order to measure changes that have occurred through time. We have utilized closed ended questionnaires in order to acquire relevant objective data. By using a combination of instruments and techniques we have been able to examine a wide range of variables.

The Ambiguity of the Managerial Role

While our research is far from complete, we see an emerging major theme in our findings. For purposes of this paper let us put this theme as a hypothesis for which we have some evidence but which is by no means definitely supported as yet. It can be stated as follows:

For most students, faculty, and even managers who employ our graduates, the managerial role and the career path into it are highly ambiguous. Therefore, the student is unclear about the functions of his training, he has a vague image of his future, and he does not see a clear set of career goals to pursue following graduation.

Several kinds of data support this bold assertion.

1. Both faculty and students find it extremely difficult to arrive at any consensus on educational goals. We have interviewed a wide range of our faculty concerning their goals and find that faculty members not only differ markedly from each other, but also that their goals are very general.*

> "I want to show students how to consider more and different variables in analyzing a business problem."
>
> "I want to show students that decisions should be made on the basis of quantitative techniques and models."
>
> "My goal is to humanize students and make them able to tolerate ambiguity."

The faculty did not, however, have any clear concept of where or how such an analytical skill is ever likely to be used by the student. One can also note that the three examples illustrate quite different goals. One stresses cognitive knowledge, another quantitative competence, and the third personal tolerance. While all these goals may be relevant, it is interesting to note that any given faculty member will stress only one of them. This tendency leads to a rather confused image in the mind of the student concerning precisely what skills are relevant for management and to what extent.

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* Data reported in this section are based in part upon interviews conducted by Donald Besser.

2. Students are even more vague about their educational goals. Rather than citing positive goals most undergraduates interviewed cited negative reactions as their purpose in entering management study. In twenty-eight out of thirty-five interviews, disinterest or poor performance in mathematics, science or engineering was cited as the main reason for entering management study. In choosing their particular majors within management, students frequently cited problems with the other majors in management rather than positive aspects of their particular field.

Among the masters students one finds a very wide range as well as very broad goals. In a questionnaire administered at the beginning of the program, over 50% mentioned the desire to gain a general understanding of business, its techniques, and its environment as one of their goals. One can speculate that for many this goal is stimulated by a general lack of awareness of precisely what the management role really implies. In addition, almost 20% mentioned that their goal was to determine their precise type of career and field of specialization.

The remainder of responses were spread over a wide range of areas. Some wanted to acquire skill in functional areas such as marketing, finance, and production. Others wanted a better understanding of the basic disciplines such as economics, quantitative methods, and behavioral science. Students also frequently mentioned goals such as learning to make decisions and analyze problems. Finally, many mentioned behavioral goals such as maturing, learning to express himself better, and learning proper attitudes. The following examples illustrate the breadth and generality of the responses.

> "Strengthen my memory on the subjects I have taken in my undergraduate school. Learn a little more about life."

"I would like to obtain as much business exposure as possible, both to help me reach a career decision and decide whether I want to (or could!) work for an employer."

"In the next two years I hope to learn exactly what the fields of business are and where my ability would best be put. In other words, hope to be able to find myself in business."

"Acquire general knowledge and specific skills and techniques needed for corporate management of the production function."

"My objectives are to acquaint myself with the management and business facets of industry."

"I hope to become familiar with the role of a manager in my specific field of study."

3. Students are also unable to articulate career goals. They can pick generalized values like income, success, independence, authority, and challenge, but they do not have any clear concept of how these objectives can be achieved. Among the undergraduates, over one-third responded that they were lost as far as choosing a profession. Some of their comments were:

"I am confused about pursuing an interesting career in teaching or working for my father which would be financially rewarding."

"I am in the process of deciding whether to work for a big company and make money or withdraw."

"I am waiting to be hit on the head with some goals."

Even those who are definitely committed to management have only vague ideas about the nature of their careers. Many undergraduates commented that they were searching to find their particular area of interest. Others seemed concerned with the problem of determining what type of company they wanted to work for.

While the master's students were more committed to management, they were also unsure about the nature of their career even after they had accepted their

first job. Students were generally unable to describe any aspiration level. Many were torn between developing their own companies or attempting to succeed in a large corporation. Most of the students talked about very general goals such as "proving I can accept responsibility." Some of the students admitted that they were generally unsure of their long-run goals--"The question of goals is one I am still wrestling with."

> "The fact of the matter is I have no ideas about career goals."
>
> "I've been asked about goals before and I've always had trouble. I hope possibly to be in business on my own, although I have no idea what type of business it would be."
>
> "I am highly unclear. It might be that I will be striving to run my own business successfully or just aiming toward a position of responsibility."

One finds that one of the reasons for this apparent ambiguity is that the commitment to management occurred just prior to entering management school. As stated earlier, the undergraduates generally chose business only after engineering or science. Thirty-four out of the forty-five students in the master's panel majored in engineering and science. Several of the panel members had worked as engineers, become dissatisfied and then entered management study. Many of those who did come directly from an undergraduate management program made their decision late in their college career and only after they had become disillusioned with another career. The following comments typify the timing of the decision to enter management study:

> "After practicing mechanical engineering, I found I had no control over my destiny which I expect to have in management."
>
> "Business never came into the picture until my senior year."
>
> "I had not thought of graduate management education until I became dissatisfied with my engineering job."

4. Our final point which emphasizes the ambiguity of the managerial role is that even employers cannot specify any likely career path for the graduate. While employers emphasize the opportunities in their company, very few can clearly define the attitudes or skills required for advancement, and the steps in a management career. During interviews they will discuss the first assignment, social advantages, and economic incentives, but give the student little idea about his future in five years. As one student stated, "they can't tell you what you will be doing when you start work, let along in the future." This statement is verified by the fact that many companies' training programs consist of working in various departments. After broad exposure to different departments, the graduate is finally placed in a position. Even many of the Sloan Fellows, middle managers who spend a year studying at MIT, are unsure of what positions they will be assigned when they return to their company.*

Employers are also unable to specify any criteria for success. Interviews with graduates indicate they are very vague about the relevance of technical competence, social and communication skills, and fitting into the company. Graduates also seem very frustrated by the absence of any cues about their potential. First, they generally receive very little feedback or appraisal during their first year. Second, many feel that they have had very few opportunities to prove or test their productive capabilities. Finally, students find themselves confused about the importance of politics and personal sacrifice in getting ahead (Schein, 1962.)

Why is the Managerial Role Ambiguous?

While the data tend to support our hypothesis, one can only speculate about the causes of the ambiguity of the managerial role. However, if one applies to

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*Based on interviews conducted by Paul Hagan and a questionnaire survey by William Springer.

the profession of management some of the same criteria as have been applied to other professions like medicine and law, he can find some theoretical reasons explaining the ambiguity of the managerial role. First, we find there is no clear concept of who the client is (Schein, 1966). Unlike medicine or law where one is concerned with a well defined client, subject only to the constraints of a professional society, the manager operates in a multi-client system where he has to balance the interests of stockholders, superiors, subordinates, customers, and society. It is our hypothesis that managers in different locations of the organization have different basic concepts of their managerial role above and beyond the technical differences between the jobs. For example, the sales manager is mostly concerned with the customer as a client, while the production manager who is more concerned with employees and the organization itself as a client.

Management as a profession is also characterized by relatively little isomorphism between junior and senior managerial roles. The nature of the job and the skills and attitudes required to perform it change as one moves from first level supervision to senior vice president. Whether considering movement from staff to line, or sales manager to vice president, the young manager is faced with the problem of transferring specialist skills into generalist roles, requiring the learning of new attitudes and perspectives as well as new skills. The medical resident can get a much better feel for what the senior surgeon does than the management trainee can get a feel for what the vice president does. It has been difficult to generate good managerial apprenticeship programs in industry because of the wide variations in what managers at different levels do.

Finally, some of the ambiguity of the managerial role is reflected in the inability of both practicing managers and scientists studying management to specify the core content which a person must learn to perform the role.

Management programs are extremely broad, general, and diverse. There is no clear body of management theory comparable to anatomy and physiology. There are no clearly defined basic skills which could be utilized to define professional standards through tests, licensing, or other devices.

One might question why students are willing to tolerate all of this ambiguity. It appears that while the precise career paths are indefinite, the student has tremendous confidence in both himself and the school. First, students are aware of the sellers market for good managers. Second, they perceive that the prestige of the degree, particularly from a high status institution, provides them with significant security and initial reputation. As one dissatisfied undergraduate put it, his reason for remaining at MIT is that "you just don't leave the best." Finally, students feel that their education provides them with advanced knowledge.

Some Consequences

What are some identifiable consequences of the ambiguity of the managerial role? First, over 50% of the master's graduates have left at least one company in the past five years and several have been with three or four. In citing their motivations for leaving, graduates most often cited, "lack of challenge," "lack of opportunity for advancement," "low standards," etc. This phenomenon indicates the discrepancy between the graduates' self image and expectations and the actual conditions which exist within the company. One could also argue that the inherent ambiguity of the managerial roles makes it difficult both for graduates and employers to evaluate whether their mutual needs will be satisfied (Schein, 1964; 1967).

One also finds that the graduate is finally forced to make decisions about his career goals, values, and life goals. In discussing the most significant changes that occurred after graduation, students most often mentioned establishing

relative weights for income, status, challenge, involvement, authority, and home life in attaining personal satisfaction.

Graduates were also frequently faced with the problems of establishing ethical frameworks and coping with the political and social factors of organizations. Finally, students find themselves discovering their potential in more realistic terms and determining the most effective means to achieve their potential. The following statements illustrate the need of the graduate to establish more concrete expectations and make decisions about his future career:

> "Earning more money has become increasingly important to me primarily for the material comforts that it brings but partially for status reasons.
>
> "I am less concerned with money and am willing to slow down my rate of business advancement to enjoy personal life--but discovered it too late to prevent my obtaining a divorce."
>
> "less idealistic--changed from 'I want to make it on my own attitude' and went into family business"
>
> "my aspirations for a sense of accomplishment through my work are greatly diminished.

The final consequence of the ambiguity of the managerial role is the strenuous nature of the transition from school into work organizations. At school students are taught rational decision making, shown the ideal solutions and influenced to believe that one's job should be interesting, challenging, and rewarding. Students are also taught to analyze problems from the position of a top executive. Unfortunately the first job is frequently the antithesis of their instruction. Graduates frequently become frustrated at the unwillingness of companies to pursue optimum solutions. One student commented "I became frustrated in attempts to implement proven concepts and ideas." Another was instructed absolutely not to use his slide rule at work. Graduates found problems in accepting the political

implications of working for large companies--"what the boss says goes without question." Graduates were also bothered by the lack of challenge and involvement in their work. Over one-third cited the need for challenging work as one of their main reasons for leaving a job.

Students experienced difficulty in the transition because of their inability to identify with the company. They were frequently perceived as "fair haired boys" which made many coworkers resentful. The graduates resented many of the company norms regarding aspects such as clothes, drinking, and social life. Frequently students found quite a wide variance in their own and company attitudes. For example one student commented, "I find my views more liberal than my business associates and the difference seems to be increasing." Also, the frustration of the job accompanied by the sense of pride in a professional education caused the graduates to identify more with their school peers than their company associates. In particular several Sloan Fellows commented that they felt more identification with their classmates than their companies.

Conclusion

While our research is far from complete and only at the hypothesis formulation stage, we feel there is very strong evidence which supports our statement about the amibiguity of the managerial role. First, our limited evidence indicates that students, faculty, and employers have a difficult time describing the content and career pattern of the managerial role. Second, the nature of management as a profession provides a theoretical rationale to explain the described phenomenon. Finally, the observed consequences are consistent with the original observations. Hopefully, as we enlarge our data base to other institutions and thoroughly analyze the data from our own institution, our tentative formulations will be confirmed.

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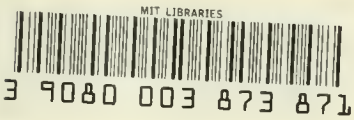

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